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A Case Study of Beijing Capital International Airport Services for Passengers with Mobility Impairments: Perceptions of Airline and Airport Staff

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ABSTRACT

Despite airports and airlines attempt over the past two decades to provide a satisfactory travel experience, travelers with disabilities still encounter disconformity between Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA) regulations and the actual service delivery. The purpose of this study is to explore the service needs and service challenges while serving air travelers with mobility impairments at the Beijing International airport. A total of twenty one airline ground staff and airport agents participated in the personal interviews and focus group discussions. The study suggests people with mobility impairments have diverse needs during air travel. More training to airline and airport ground staff is suggested to better fulfill these needs. Limitations, implications, and recommendations for future studies are provided.

Keywords: *airline, airport, people with mobility impacts, service needs, service challenges*

INTRODUCTION

Since the enactment of the Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA), airlines have strived to ensure accessible facilities onboard and at airports. More importantly, research has recognized the importance of services provided by airline and airport agents to travelers with mobility impairments (Chang & Chen, 2012). Providing satisfactory services to people with mobility impairments could be challenging for airlines since air travelers with mobility impairments may have needs other than needs for physical access to airports or airplanes.

Many studies have been conducted to understand the service needs of travelers with mobility impairments in the tourism industry. Such studies have found that people with disabilities need accessible facilities when selecting hotel rooms (Darcy, 2010), parking while dinning out (McClain et al., 1993; McClain & Todd, 1990), accessing the restroom area on cruise lines (Edmonds, 2003), and visiting museums (Poria, Reichel, & Brandt, 2009). As long-haul air travel has become a more popular way of transportation in recent years, airline managers also need to understand what specific service needs that people with mobility impairments have in addition to the accessibility issues.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Limited research has been conducted on airport services for passengers with mobility impairments. With increasingly more leisure and business travels to China, specifically since the 2008 Olympic Games, Beijing Capital International Airport has received more traffic. To further enhance airline and airport services for people with disabilities, the purpose of this study is two-fold: 1) to explore the service needs of people with disabilities at Beijing airport; and 2) to investigate the challenges while serving air travelers with mobility impairments.

METHODOLOGY

Individual interviews and focus group interviews were conducted to acquire opinions and personal experiences among ground staff who worked at Beijing Capital Airport. Convenient sampling and snowball sampling were used to select participants. Participants had to be 18 years or older and they had to work at least half a year as a ground staff at Beijing Capital Airport.

Before the interview, a brief survey was distributed soliciting participants' demographic information. To answer the research questions, participants were asked three main interview questions: 1) use examples to describe the needs and expectations of passengers with mobility impairments; 2) specify what kind of challenges you have encountered while serving people with mobility impairments; and 3) provide suggestions to improve services for passengers with mobility impairments. All interviews were audio-recorded and conducted in Mandarin. Three bilingual graduate students, who were not part of the research, transcribed and translated the scripts from Mandarin to English. The transcripts were analyzed by using constant comparative analysis.

RESULTS

A total of 21 participants provided their valuable opinions. The majority of participants were females (n=18, 85.7%), and ranged from 20 to 46 years old (average=28). On average, they had worked in the airline industry or at the Beijing airport for about 6.7 years. Most of them had college or junior college degree (n=16, 76.2%). Participants indicated that they had worked either in the Beijing Aviation Ground Service at terminal II; Air China ground service at terminal III; or international airlines, such as DragonAir, Air Canada, SwissAir, or Air France.

Participants suggested that people with mobility impairments are mostly satisfied with facilities at the Beijing airport. People with mobility impairments asked airport representatives to provide information on how to transfer to their connection flights, assist with picking up their luggage, exchange foreign currency, and call their local contacts. Participants also expressed that people with mobility impairments expected ground staff to have good communication skills (e.g., using proper language and body gestures, respect religious beliefs) and equipment handling skills (e.g., pushing and pulling wheelchairs on slopes).

Three major challenges were mentioned across focus group and individual interviews. First, it was challenging for ground staff to determine if a passenger with mobility impairment is fit to fly. Some illness and injuries cannot be assessed within a short time, particularly among passengers who need to undertake a surgery at a destination hospital. Second, wheelchairs are costly investments (\$1,500-\$2,000 per wheelchair) and the damage rate is high (each wheelchair

lasts only for half a year). How to ensure services to those who need wheelchairs can be challenging under special circumstances (e.g., Paralympics or disabled performing arts troupe). Third, there is no set rule on how to satisfy passengers' needs since every traveler is different, and many airlines have their own standards to serve people with disabilities. Recommendations were given to better serve people with mobility impairments, such as using passengers' names and seat numbers to ensure they receive the wheelchair service required; recurrent trainings to enhance front-line employees' service skills; and more signs at the airport.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study have demonstrated the need for more careful and personalized services for air travelers with mobility impairments. Although challenges still exist, participants expressed that additional efforts can be made to airport services for people with mobility impairments. In addition to enhancing the accessible facilities and improving services, airline managers could provide more information and assistance to air travelers with mobility impairments. More training is needed to inform employees with more recent and accurate information and to improve their communication and equipment handling skills. Future studies can build upon the current study to further understand passengers' needs in other cultures.

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